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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet, targeted to boys' parents, discusses issues surrounding puberty. The introduction discusses education about menstruation and girls' and boys' attitudes towards it. Suggestions are offered for discussing menstruation with one's son. Suggestions focus on timing of introducing the topic; which parent takes responsibility for menstrual education; examining one's own attitudes towards menstruation; what kinds of resources are available; and the best approach to take and ways to facilitate communication. References are included and sources of information for early adolescents are listed. (ABL)

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BODY TALK

FOR PARENTS OF BOYS.

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BY MARGARET L. STUBBS with illustrations by Jennifer E. Putnam.

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BODY TALK FOR PARENTS OF BOYS

By Margaret L. Stubbs

Illustrations by Jennifer E. Putnam

Design and Production by Jan Putnam

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This pamphlet is designed for use by parents of early adolescent boys. It is most effective when used in combination with **BODY TALK For Boys Growing Up.**

WHY THIS PAMPHLET?

If you are the parents of early adolescent sons, and especially if you have no daughters, you have probably not given much—or perhaps **any**—thought to teaching your sons about menstruation when you talk to them about puberty. You've probably decided that, since boys don't menstruate, you don't need to give any special attention to it, especially in anticipation of discussions about other aspects of pubertal development that they will experience directly. Like other parents of boys, you may have decided that they'll learn whatever they need to know about menstruation at school—in the birds and bees lecture in late elementary or junior high school, or later in biology class.

Unfortunately, though more attention is now given in the schools to pubertal education than was the case even 15 years ago, most health education programs are far from comprehensive, and many questions are left unanswered.[1] While there is currently no way of knowing much about the scope and content of particular courses, it may be said that typical programs consist of sex-segregated discussions about topics pertinent to same-sex development. In the face of too much to teach, and too much to learn in the time allotted, questions about opposite-sex development are not often addressed. As a result, boys have little opportunity to learn about what girls experience during puberty and, by the same token, girls have little opportunity to learn about what boys experience.

Lack of information, however, does not prevent the development of strong opinions and attitudes about the development of the opposite sex. In interviews with college-aged males, most of whom were lucky enough to have had at least one introductory school lecture on menstruation in the late elementary or junior high school grades, many young men reported that their first reactions to menstruation included disgust (at the blood) and fear (because they thought girls

were in pain).[2] Although these initial reactions gave way to less charged responses to menstruation later in adolescence as a result of talking openly with a trusted girlfriend about menstruation, this and other research has shown a difference between females' and males' perceptions of the impact of menstruation on girls and women. In general, males think menstruation is more debilitating than females report it to be.[3]

In talking with early adolescents, we've learned that both boys and girls have questions about physical changes—their own and those of the opposite sex. Early adolescent boys, for instance, do have questions about menstruation. One 10 year old boy, for example, had heard that he should try to be nice to girls when they were menstruating. This he was prepared to do except, "How do you know when they're doing it?," he asked. And, even though they may not want to talk directly to them about it, girls want boys to know about menstruation—in part so that boys won't make such a big deal of it. Girls dread being teased about menstruation and other aspects of physical development, as do boys. It is our belief that more comprehensive pubertal education for both boys and girls should serve to help each group understand more about what the other experiences. Further understanding about what the opposite sex experiences should help to reduce the awkwardness and teasing between the sexes that currently characterizes early adolescence, and poses an added burden for young people during this time.

Toward this end, we'd like to suggest that the parents of sons think about addressing topics that are perhaps more directly a part of girls' development in discussions about puberty with sons—and vice versa. Because we realize from talking with parents as well as early adolescents that both adults and young people are often tongue-tied when it comes to initiating or maintaining conversations about various aspects of puberty, we describe in this pamphlet—and in the accompanying one

for sons—several strategies that we hope will help early adolescents and their parents address the questions young people may have about puberty. In the pamphlet for boys, parents are featured as a resource to be tapped, and specific suggestions for initiating a conversation with mom or dad are highlighted. In this pamphlet for parents, we offer a similar set of suggestions for adults. We hope these suggestions will help you develop some general strategies for talking with your son—strategies that will continue to be of use in future talks about growing up. In addition, by providing some information about menstruation in particular, we hope to redress the lack of opportunity boys have to learn about this aspect of female development.

ABOUT MENSTRUATION

It is tempting to interpret the increased attention to menstruation in the media as an indication of improved cultural attitudes toward menstruation. After all, current ads for menstrual products are more upbeat than their counterparts of 30 years ago. In the 50's, a haggard Peggy was puffy with periodic pain. Today, the ads for menstrual products feature physically active, sparklingly beautiful teens and young women who obviously don't think twice about wearing white during "those days." Certainly, the picture painted in the media seems to imply that menstruation *per se* is no longer as embarrassing as it used to be, and that girls and women are much more comfortable with the whole process.

Although it may seem as though we talk more openly about menstruation today, if you look closely at what is being said, you'll notice that the event is still being defined in negative terms. Although public advertisements for menstrual products are prolific, products are still described as successful to the extent that they help to "prevent accidents," and product information continues to emphasize menstruation as a crisis in hygiene. Girls and women are urged to keep clean and, further, to "act normal" so no one will know, thus implying that there is something both dirty and abnormal about menstruation. Finally, the abundance of derogatory terms used in the culture to refer to menstruation is a further indication of our continuing discomfort with it.

From research about the psychological meaning of menstruation to girls and women that has been undertaken recently, there is evidence to suggest that today's young girls—unlike those portrayed in the flashy menstrual product ads—are not wholly nonchalant about menstruation.[4] Indeed, our work with early adolescent girls aged 11 to 14 has revealed that girls do not make the adjustment to menstrual life casually.[5, 6]

In our work,[7] we ask girls directly what they know and think about menstruation. Many are reluctant to answer these questions, one indication of their discomfort with menstruation. Many girls write in negative comments instead of answers to specific questions.

What do girls know about menstruation? When we look at the responses of the girls who do answer the questions we ask—for instance, about what causes menstruation, how long it lasts, how much blood is lost and how menstrual products are used—we find, not surprisingly, that older girls are more knowledgeable than younger girls. With regard to specifics, more girls know how often menstruation occurs and how long a menstrual period lasts, but far fewer give an accurate description of what causes menstruation, how menstrual products are used, or how much blood is lost.

How do girls react to menstruation? In general, girls have mixed reactions.[8] On one hand, girls think that menstruation is normal and that it is a sign of growing up. At the same time, they are worried about menstruation. They wonder what to do, for instance, if they get their period in the middle of class, or if they stain their clothing. These are only two of a number of specific concerns about actually coping with menstruation. In addition, girls' attitudes toward menstruation change throughout early adolescence. The timing of menarche—or first menstruation—makes a difference. For instance, early maturers (for example, sixth graders who are already menstruating) are more worried about menstruation than their grademates who have not yet begun to menstruate.[5,6]

Young premenarcheal girls with whom we worked (fifth or sixth graders, for example, who have not yet had a first period) were preoccupied with wanting to know exactly when their first period would be. These girls, in the absence of actual experience, were full of "what if" and "how" questions. Yet, in the forum we provided, these same girls

revealed that they did not know how to go about asking them. Many—far more than we would have thought— could not imagine asking their mothers (or the school nurse or a teacher) for help in getting information or in getting menstrual products for practice ahead of time.

We've learned that newly postmenarcheal girls are also reticent about asking adults for more information about menstruation. Although newly postmenarcheal girls have the benefit of some concrete experience with menstruation, new concerns surface as a result of that experience. One practical problem these girls told us about had to do with the lack of private access to menstrual products in school. Too often in elementary, junior high and middle schools, there are no machines to dispense menstrual products in the girls' lavatories. Girls who need supplies must often rely on the school nurse or sometimes the school secretary (someone with whom they may not have a satisfactory personal relationship) to provide them. Remembering to bring supplies from home takes time and a good deal of planning ahead—a cognitive skill that early adolescents are just beginning to use. In addition, bringing one's own supplies presents girls with the additional problem of making sure that their pads and tampons don't fall out of the bookbag, purse, or locker at an inappropriate time. Girls we've worked with dislike these difficulties. They wish that it were easier for them to manage their periods in school, and having private access to supplies would help. But these girls, though "experienced," were just as speechless as premenarcheal girls in attempting to communicate their concerns to adults who might be able to offer them some assistance.

If girls are hesitant to ask questions and talk about menstruation, boys are more so. How might one break the ice, with regard to this or other pubertal issues?

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR SON ABOUT MENSTRUATION

When is the Best Time to Introduce the Topic?

If you are the parent of a fifth or sixth grade boy, now is the time to start thinking about what you'd like to say to him about menstruation. This is the time when some of the girls in his class may well have—or will soon have—experienced a first menstruation. While the average age of menarche in this country is about 12.6 years [9] —or the middle of seventh grade—menstruation can occur as early as age 8 and as late as age 16 or 17. Researchers have not determined the exact pattern of biological events leading to menarche, but there is some evidence to suggest that the fat-to-muscle ratio may be an important factor. [10] It is thought that menstruation may not occur unless there is a certain proportion of fat in comparison to muscle content within the body. In our study, [7] about 19 percent of the girls had a first period by the beginning of sixth grade, while six percent had not yet begun by the end of ninth grade.

Which Parent Takes Responsibility for Menstrual Education?

At first glance, this may seem like a silly question—the answer is Mom, of course. It is true that girls consider Mom as the most important source of information about menstruation [11] and report that fathers have played virtually no role in menstrual education, while young men (at least those we interviewed) have reported that they never really learned about menstruation until later in adolescence from their girlfriends. For the early adolescent boy, Mom is most certainly an expert who can draw on her own experience and—depending on whether or not she feels comfortable talking to her son about this or other aspects of puberty—she would be a good resource.

We'd like to suggest that fathers, too, can play an important role in educating their sons about menstruation. After all, they may more typically take the responsibility in the home for talking with sons about various aspects of pubertal development and—though they may not think of themselves as sources of information about female development or about menstruation in particular—they have a special perspective on menstruation that is likely to be of interest to sons because they have been friends with and dated menstruating females throughout their lives and have lived with a menstruating woman.

What Are Your Own Attitudes Toward Menstruation?

Before planning the specifics of a talk with your son about menstruation, we suggest that both parents think a little bit about their own attitudes towards and experience of menstruation. Although some of the following questions are more appropriate for mothers, and others for fathers, all are intended to help both parents focus on their own feelings and reactions to menstruation. (Note: this is an exercise—there are no right or wrong or socially preferred answers to these questions.)

- Do you talk about menstruation openly in your family or with friends?
- Does anyone/everyone in your family know when Mom has her period?
- Where does Mom keep her supplies?
- Is disposing of used supplies a big issue—that is, how would other family members react to seeing a used pad or tampon at the top of the trash basket in the bathroom?
- Has Mom been in situations when she's bled through? Has Dad seen that happen to Mom or to someone else? What happened?

- Does either parent remember if the children had questions about menstruation when they were much younger—as preschoolers, for example?
- Does either parent know about their mother's first period, or about how she managed her menstruation, or what she thought about menstruating?

For Mom:

- Does your son/husband already know about your first period?
- What was it like?

For Dad:

- What are your reactions to your wife's periods—to your wife during her periods?

What Kinds of Resources are Available?

Now that you've explored some of your own feelings, think about the specifics of what you want to say. If you need information about the facts there are, fortunately, many resources upon which to draw.

We've included in this pamphlet a list of books that we think are excellent sources of information about menstruation and other aspects of puberty for early adolescents and their parents. Some encourage the parent and child to read along together. We like these books because the reading level is appropriate for most upper elementary school students, the material is not too technical, and the authors display a sense of humor. In addition, most emphasize the **variation** in development. Too often books or magazine articles over-generalize. In comparing themselves to the typical case, children whose experiences do not match exactly can wonder about being normal. Family and friends can overgeneralize too if, based on the typical case represented in books and magazines, they assume that all girls experience menstruation in the same way.

Finally, these books provide lots of concrete information. While early adolescents are beginning to make the transition to abstract thinking, they still rely heavily on the here and now. Consequently, many of their concerns are practical. These books focus on the practical and the concrete, and thereby address early adolescents' more immediate concerns about physical development.

What is the Best Approach to Take?

In thinking about how to communicate with your son, it is important to remember that no one approach can be described as fool-proof. So much depends on other factors–for instance, on the ways in which you and your child already communicate about less sensitive issues.

One general guideline may help. We advocate thinking of pubertal education as a continuing process that, at best, begins in early adolescence and extends throughout the entire period of adolescence. Thinking of pubertal education as a continuing process can take the pressure off both children and parents. Parents can be more relaxed in any one talk if they know that they'll have more than one opportunity to provide all the information they want to convey. And, if one approach doesn't seem to work, there'll be more opportunities to try different approaches.

Children, too can be more relaxed about learning about menstruation if they realize that they'll have several–not just one–opportunity to take it all in. If you think about how long it takes kids to learn something as unemotionally charged as long division, it becomes immediately obvious that more than one lesson on menstruation–or any other aspect of puberty–makes sense!

What Are Some of the Ways to Facilitate Communication?

Some logistical planning can facilitate communication. In our work with young people, we encourage them to think about the logistics of having an important talk with a parent (see the accompanying BODY TALK pamphlet for boys growing up), and we would urge you to do the same. Before you have your talk, think about these things:

1) Decide what it is you want to talk about.

   In this instance, the topic is menstruation, but when addressing another topic in future talks, think about your comfort level with the topic ahead of time. As we asked you to think about menstruation, ask yourself what your own feelings and attitudes are about whatever you are going to discuss before you set out to do it.

   Do you want to impart information to your son?

   Do you want to obtain information from your son—for instance, about what he already knows about the topic?

2) Think about the context of the conversation.

   Are you initiating the conversation?

   Are you responding to a specific question from your son?

   Are you responding to a specific event (your son's friend just got her period)?

   Is this likely to be the first time your son has heard about menstruation?

3) Pick a good time to talk—for both you **and** your son.

   Check with your son to make sure the time you pick is okay with him, too.

4) At a loss for how to start the conversation? Here are some opening lines that may be helpful:

A friend told me her daughter who is about your age just got her first period. It made me start thinking about the physical changes that kids experience as they grow up, and talking with you about them.

I wondered if you had any questions about the physical part of growing up. I'd be happy to tell you what I know about it, or to get you some books. Maybe we could read a book together and talk about it.

I sent away for these pamphlets the other day for parents of kids about your age . . .

I don't think I'm very good at explaining the physical part of growing up, but I want you to know that I'll try to answer your questions.

As you grow, I know you'll have lots of thoughts and questions about the new experiences you'll be having. I hope we'll be able to talk to each other about them. Sometimes, you'll bring up something for us to discuss. Sometimes I'll do it. Here's what I've been thinking about lately . . .

5) Think about the format.

Is talking the best way for you to communicate with your son?

Maybe writing letters back and forth, or keeping a special journal that you share is more appealing to you—or, perhaps, to him.

I hope this pamphlet has provided you with some food for thought about how you might initiate some discussion with your child about one aspect of pubertal development.

I hope also that it has provided you with some useful information about menarche and menstruation in particular—and that the suggestions for communicating about this aspect of development will be useful to you as you continue talking with your son about other aspects of growing up.

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7. Grant 16034 from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to Drs. Jill Rierdan and Elissa Koff has supported an ongoing program of research involving over 600 early adolescent girls, aged 11 through 14. The project, housed at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181, continues to provide information about early adolescent girls' development. Drs. Rierdan and Koff are the

project's principal investigators. The author served as research associate on the project from 1982 to 1989 and was responsible for data collection and management, as well as for communication with school personnel, girls and their families.

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10. Frisch, R. E. (1983). Fatness, menarche, and fertility. In S. Golub (Ed.), **Menarche.** Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.

11. Koff, E., Rierdan, J., & Jacobson, S. (1981). The personal and interpersonal significance of menarche. **Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 20,** 148-158.

HELPFUL SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT PUBERTY FOR EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Ruth Bell, **Changing Bodies, Changing Lives**, Random House, New York.

Helen McKinnon Doan and Janice Morse, **Every Girl**, Stoddart Publishing Company, Ltd., 34 Lesmill Road, Toronto, Canada M3B 2T6.

JoAnn Gardner-Loulan, Bonnie Lopez and Marcia Quackenbush, **Period**, Volcano Press, P. O. Box 270, Volcano, CA 95689. (This book is also written in Spanish.)

Lynda Madaras's Growing Up Guide for Girls, Newmarket Press, New York.

Lynda Madaras, **What's Happening to My Body? A Guide for Mothers and Daughters,** Newmarket Press, New York.

Lynda Madaras, **The What's Happening to My Body Book for Boys: For Parents and Sons**, Newmarket Press, New York.

Peter Mayle, **What's Happening to Me?**, Lyle Stuart, Inc., 120 Enterprise Avenue, Secaucus, NJ 07094.

Peter Mayle, **Where Did I Come From?**, Lyle Stuart, Inc., 120 Enterprise Avenue, Secaucus, NJ 07094

Kathy McCoy, **The Teenage Survival Book**, Wallaby Books, Simon & Schuster, New York.

POSTSCRIPT

I'm interested in your reactions to this pamphlet--and your thoughts about it. Please let me know what you think by writing to me at the following address:

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